

MARGARET ATWOOD: OLD BABES IN THE WOOD.
STORIES (2023)

AIRBORNE:

A SYMPOSIUM

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Myrna arrives at Chrissy's house and rings the doorbell. The chimes play, to no avail. She walks in. "It's me," she calls, or more like yells. "You shouldn't leave the door unlocked! I might be a serial killer!"

"Coming in a minute," Chrissy yells back from somewhere inside.

The pink-tiled hallway is at least cooler. Myrna checks herself in the big oblong mirror—a turquoise wooden frame, a knot of ribbons carved at the top, with an implication of French Provincial. Chrissy can never resist the so-called antique shops, however sham their contents. Other people's leftovers; as, once, Chrissy's taste in men. Really, that thing should be in a bedroom.

"Crap, it's hot," Myrna mutters to herself, pulling off her straw sunhat, pushing back a few limp strands of her overly magenta hair. She shouldn't have let Antonio of the silver scissors have his way. He did apologize obliquely for how it had come out. They could adjust the colour the next time, he'd said, and meanwhile it was certainly dramatic, so enjoy.

Also, she shouldn't have worn this sleeveless dress, for a couple of reasons: one, sunburn; two, flabby triceps. The hand weights

have not been enough, though if she'd done more than look at them things might be different. Green is not her colour. Or not this lime green, which makes her skin look jaundiced.

Why so vain? she asks her reflection. It's far too late for vanity. Nobody cares what you look like, not anymore.

She makes her way into Chrissy's living room. The oatmeal-toned carpet feels spongy underfoot, like damp moss: Toronto used to be in a swamp; still is, as far as the humidity's concerned. Everything is as usual: the Mexican vase of dried flowers and branches sprayed mauve and aqua and silver, the throw cushions with embroidered motifs from the women's collective in Bangladesh, the framed blow-up of the rejected cover design of Chrissy's one and only successful book, *Airborne: Women Aloft*. This is the cover Chrissy had longed for, but the one they'd actually foisted on her had been much more basic: orange, with a small image of an ultralight biplane on it. Cover images needed to be crisp, they'd said. They needed to be visible on cellphones.

Airborne was an excursion into cross-disciplinary feminist analysis, or so Chrissy had claimed. (Pseudo-piffle, Myrna had glossed. She considered herself more rigorous.) Chrissy had once taught mythology and folklore at Toronto's third-ranked university; her book had begun as an academic paper on imagined females who denied the laws of gravity.

But *Airborne* didn't stop at Iris, the rainbow messenger of the gods; or the winged and clawed harpies; or the old woman tossed up in a basket of nursery rhyme; or the Flower Fairies of Cicely Barker; or Mary Poppins descending from a cloud with the aid of a magic umbrella; or Tinker Bell, the tiny, sparkly imp in *Peter Pan*; or the well-meaning Benandanti of Italy battling the spiteful witches in the air to save the harvest; or Dorothy of Oz and her little dog, Toto, so frequently aloft. Chrissy had segued from fic-

tion and myth into real life: women shot from cannons, scantily clad lady acrobats falling to their deaths, Amelia Earhart and her mysterious disappearance, and the Night Witches, that band of dauntless Soviet girl pilots in their plywood biplanes who'd rained down death under cover of darkness in World War Two.

What did such flying women mean to those who observed them, either on the page or from below? Chrissy had proposed several theories. Sexual sadism was one—some people might like to watch beautiful acrobats flailing and terrified—and the understandable female desire to escape the constraints of their earth-bound physical bodies was another. What girl hadn't had dreams of liftoff?

Some purchasers had complained: they'd thought they were getting a book about Allied fighter squadrons and found a bunch of fairies. "Fucking fairies," to be precise, thought Myrna, who'd read some of the outraged letters Chrissy had received. Why hadn't they consulted the table of contents? Chrissy had asked plaintively. Why did they say such nasty things? *Stupid feminazi bitch* was not a term you'd employ in a serious academic debate, though *feminazi* had first come from a university professor. And why had two reviewers used the word *frivolous* about her mind, while a third had jeered *airhead*?

"If you publish a book and you've got a C-word body part, you're a hate magnet," Leonie had comforted Chrissy. "Automatic. Happens to us all." She'd added, as she frequently did, "It was worse during the French Revolution. You could get your head cut off for not saying 'Citizen.'" The French Revolution was Leonie's own specialty. She'd taught it at Toronto's second-rated university, back when history still had some cachet.

She too had published a book: *Thermidor*! She'd originally tried the academic publishers, but no dice: the emphasis on sensation-

alistic violence made it difficult to take the book seriously, they'd said. A medium-sized commercial publisher had seen possibilities, however. They'd removed Leonie's subtitle, which had been "Extra-judicial Political Reprisals and Grudge Killings During the Thermidorian Reaction of the French Revolution, and Their Legacy for Today." Too stuffy, they'd said. They'd added the exclamation mark to make the book feel more dramatic, and used a plain red background, with maroon Belle Epoque lettering based on late-nineteenth-century Toulouse-Lautrec posters. When Leonie had protested the anachronism, there were wide-eyed stares from the editors: It was French, wasn't it? And didn't the colour suggest dried blood? What more could she ask for?

This cover had been a disaster, according to Leonie. Naturally she'd been attacked by a few academic pedants over the ahistorical lettering, but some ordinary bookstore customers had mistaken *Thermidor!* for a seafood cookbook with an emphasis on lobsters—the favourite crustacean of Toulouse-Lautrec—and were upset to be confronted with a drawing of Olympe de Gouges being guillotined for demanding liberty, equality, and fraternity for women, a full-colour painting of Robespierre as he was shot in the face, and an etching of vengeful counter-revolutionaries massacring Jacobin prisoners with sabres, cudgels, and pistols. What sort of bloodthirsty monster was she, to be interested in such depraved material?

Leonie too had received nasty letters. Most of the letter-writers hadn't actually read the book but were reacting to Leonie's photo, attached to the newspaper reviews. There had been a number of reviews, as mass executions and cultural panics were attention-worthy, said the cultural editors. Some of the male letter-writers accused Leonie of having made it impossible for them to get a job; others simply hurled the standard epithets—"Dumb cow," "Ugly pig," "Twisted c__t," and the like—to which had been added, from

women, "You must be sick," "Why are you so negative?" and, the coup de grâce, "I was so disappointed."

"Don't mind all this," Myrna had counselled Leonie, who'd been upset and had actually cried. Well, almost cried; real crying was not a thing her generation allowed itself in public. It was too weak and womanish: those stereotypes needed to be stamped out, hard. "A lot of people liked your book."

"Not enough people," said Leonie. "The rest made vulgar comments."

"Vulgar comments are as old as writing. You should see the tavern walls of Pompeii."

"The tavern walls of Pompeii can piss off," Leonie sniffed. "Am I a twisted c__t?"

"No more than most," said Myrna.

"It's history, it's what happened, it's what people did. Why am I getting it in the neck for writing about it?"

"Most people don't want to know what people did," said Myrna. "They prefer to eat lobsters." I'm with them, she'd added to herself. Cut-off heads do not spark joy, so why bother about them? Yes, it happened, but not everyone craves the pure clear glare of Truth.

Myrna had once studied insults and abrasive language as a social and linguistic phenomenon. She still studies them since her retirement from Toronto's top-rated university, though as a private citizen. She's noted the growing use of *disappointed* among critically inclined online females: it has almost replaced *shocked* and *outraged* as a stealth weapon, much as a faster virus variant replaces a more sluggish rival.

Meanwhile, here is Chrissy's rejected cover presiding over the living room. A pale blue sky, a colourful Victorian hot-air balloon. Three gloved and beruffled young ladies—periwinkle, rose, and mimosa—in broad hats with veils tied under their chins perch in

the wicker gondola. They wave happily at the viewer while they sail over trees and rooftops and spires and rivers, risking a little danger, taking in the overview. The sun is setting, or perhaps rising, from or into a froth of pink clouds. Fair weather ahead, or foul? Chrissy has never been definitive on that point.

Leonie has already arrived. She's wasted no time: she has a glass in hand, G and T with lime, her habitual tippie. She's reclining on the cherry velvet chaise longue, stretching out her extensive legs. White patio pants, scarlet platforms, a riotous floral top. Big dangly earrings, orange plastic. She's not wearing a wig today; her off-white hair is wispy, still growing back after the second bout of chemo. She's coloured in her eyebrows. Right after the operation and then the radiation she had a phase during which she painted cat whiskers on her face, but she's over that now.

"Hot enough for you?" Leonie says. A standard opener from forty years ago. Now it would be something with *fuck* in it, Myrna reflects. It's every second word with her teenage grandkids. The littlest ones haven't got there yet, being still at the poo-poo stage.

Fuck used to be unprintable, whereas racial and ethnic slurs were common, but now that has flipped. Myrna takes note of all such verbal mutations, what can't be said having been a leitmotif in human cultures forever. Slanderers and scatologists, form in line here; casual oath-swearers and blasphemers, over there. Taboo words that will bring bad luck, to the rear please. As for *fuck*, she once published a paper on it in *Maledicta: The International Journal of Verbal Aggression*. "'Fuck You' and 'Good Fuck': Negative and Positive Values for a Problematic Word."

"Like an oven," Myrna says. "But give it four months and we'll be moaning about the cold." She could have said We'll pay for it later, an acceptable standard reply. She could have also tried We'll

fucking pay for it later, or would that be We'll pay for it fucking later? Or maybe We'll totally pay for it fucking later.

Did she just use *totally* as a modifier? Horrid locution! How easy it is to get sucked down the verbal drain into the bottomless pit of word fashions.

"My God, what happened to your hair?" says Leonie. "Is it beet juice?"

"Run-in with a wizard," says Myrna. "He tried to turn me into an orangutan, but it only half worked."

"It'll grow out," says Leonie. Then, sensing she's been too blunt, she backtracks: "I mean, it does look kind of amazing."

"Thanks. So does yours," says Myrna. Fucking hell, she thinks. Leonie, with a 20 per cent probability of being alive in three months, plus her partner of forty-six years is in a care facility and thinks he's a bomber pilot, and we're discussing hair?

She eyes the impromptu bar Chrissy has set up on a side table: bottles and glasses, ice in a metal kitchen mixing bowl, a smaller bowl with lemon and lime wedges. Cans of Coke and ginger ale, bottles of Perrier. She's so thirsty she could swill the lot. She selects a Perrier, unscrews the top.

"Take two, they're cheap," says Leonie. "Don't worry, I'm going easy on the G this time. Doctor's orders." She laughs, a little raucously. "I overdid it at the last meeting."

The last meeting was almost a year ago, before Leonie's diagnosis. Myrna remembers the overdoing part all too clearly: she'd had to call a taxi, then stuff Leonie into it. No way Leonie should have been allowed to drive; she might have run over some hapless dog-walker. Myrna had had her work cut out, being a mere five three, whereas Leonie is five ten, not counting the platforms.

She shouldn't be drinking at all, thinks Myrna. She should be on nothing but kale juice. And blueberries, a lot of blueberries.

Chrissy hurries in, carrying a fuchsia-and-ultramarine bowl of

black olives and a cerulean plate with veggie puffs. She sets the olives and the puffs down on the glass-topped coffee table beside the stack of tiny cutwork cocktail napkins, a pink rosebud embroidered on each. She's wearing a floaty mauve garment that resembles a child's pinafore; her thin, freckled arms are bare, except for a couple of beaded bracelets. Glass earrings shaped like bunches of grapes, lilac in colour, tinkle faintly. Her grey-blond hair is in a ponytail held by an azure scrunchie with—could it be?—a unicorn pattern. It would be impolite to notice the unicorns out loud, Myrna decides.

"You're on time," Chrissy says reproachfully. "Though Leonie was actually early!"

"Sorry, not sorry," says Leonie. "Here we all are, anyway. Gaggle of hags. Except for Darlene."

Gaggle, thinks Myrna. From the German. Denoting a sound made either by a group of geese or a group of women. *Cackle* might seem to derive from the same root, but is actually . . .

"Darlene has bailed," says Chrissy. "I think I need a spritzer."

"Is she sick?" Myrna asks. So many people are.

"No, sorry, I was unclear. I should have said resigned," says Chrissy, manoeuvring a bottle and glass. "From our committee. Says we don't need the controversy."

"What controversy?" Myrna asks.

"Well, she's a dean," says Chrissy. "Also a biologist. Biologists are always getting in trouble, nobody understands them. Probably they shouldn't be deans."

"But we need Darlene! We're a train wreck without her! What happened?" says Leonie. "She said all shit stinks, or what?"

"She was on the radio," says Chrissy. "On a panel."

"Panels!" says Leonie. "Kill me first!"

Not all panels are bad, in Myrna's opinion. She'd been on one

discussing Anglo-Saxon weather kennings. That had been fun. "What sort of panel?" she asks.

Chrissy drops her voice. "Gender."

"Fuck," says Leonie. "Snake pit!"

"You know Darlene, she's so unsuspecting. She'd been asked to talk about diversity in nature, so she brought up this thing called slime moulds. They're like formless blobs. She said they can solve problems." Chrissy paused. "Also, they have seven hundred and twenty sexes."

"That's about seven hundred too many," says Leonie.

"Exactly," says Chrissy. "That part didn't make anyone happy! Some of the panellists thought she was calling them a slime mould, and the others said she was against women."

"To be fair, slime moulds aren't reassuring," says Myrna.

"Not to those people. They want everything to come in twos, and only twos. Closed boxes. Night and day. Black and white. Men and women."

"Damned and saved," says Leonie. "Very puritanical. Very revolutionary: for or against, off with their heads. So Darlene got put into the damned box?"

"More or less," says Chrissy. "It blew up on Twitter. Only for about one minute, but still. Universities are very sensitive about their images. She had to issue a statement saying she misspoke."

"Darlene never misspeaks," says Leonie. "She's very precise."

"I know," says Chrissy. "I said she *said* she misspoke. That's what deans have to say if they annoy people."

"*Misspoke*," says Myrna. "You might believe that word is an ugly modern concoction, but it's actually fourteenth-century."

"How interesting," says Chrissy vaguely. "I've got a new cheese, from that little shop. It's an ashed goat, it's named after Cinderella. Because of the ashes, I guess."

"A pox on the controversy," says Leonie. "We can handle that. Darlene thinks the three of us never had any controversy before? We want her back on the committee."

"She says she's too polarizing," says Chrissy. "She says she doesn't want to jinx the project."

"Polarizing? Praise the lady lord I no longer toil in the groves of academe," says Leonie. "Reign of Terror in there."

"We went through some of that ourselves," says Myrna. "Back in the day. Remember the fights over *womyn* with a Y?" Not to be confused with *wymmen*, she reminds herself, which is not a modern invention, but a Middle English . . .

"It never caught on, really," says Leonie. "Except among a few sects."

"You have to see Darlene's point of view," says Chrissy earnestly. "She still has a job, unlike us. She's on social media."

"Well, she should get off it," Leonie growls.

"We were polarizing too," says Myrna. "Remember when we started *Great Dames*? 'The Magazine That Frightens Postmen'? Remember the Dykes 'n' Psyches issue, about misogynistic Freudian analysts?"

"We certainly poked the bear on that one," says Leonie. "The hate mail with the capital letters, with red and blue crayon underlining calling us harridans and harpies, and the violent death threats? How inventive they were, some of them! Boobs baked in a pie, as I recall. And look, we're still alive!"

Harridan—now that word's fallen out of fashion, Myrna reflects. Not to mention *harpy*. *Boobs*, however, is still around.

"So many offers to give us what we needed, which was a good raping," says Leonie. "'Like to see you try,' I wrote back to a couple of them. 'Want a construction-boot steel-toed kick in the nuts?'"

"I never said anything as strong as that," says Chrissy. "Of

course, it helps to be on the tall side, like you. You were on the girls' soccer team in college, right?"

"Replying just egged them on," says Myrna. "Not that they ever did anything. But I carried a pointy umbrella and pepper spray, for a while."

"You aren't supposed to shout Help," says Chrissy. "You're supposed to shout Fire!"

"Why?" says Myrna. She remembers being told that the best thing was to throw up but decides not to add this to the conversation.

"Because if you shout Help, nobody will come," says Chrissy sadly. There's a pause.

Are they really that alone? Are people really that frightened and selfish?

"I'd come," says Leonie. "If I heard it."

"I know you would," says Chrissy.

"So would I," says Myrna. "If I had my pepper spray."

"Well then," says Leonie. "Back to Darlene. How old is she, anyway?"

"She's younger than us," says Chrissy, twisting the rings on her fingers—a milk opal, an amethyst. "It's different for her."

"Yeah, she's a wuss," says Leonie. She raises her glass. "Here's to polarizing." She tips back her head, pours down a third of her G and T.

"Leonie, be fair! It's not 1972 anymore," says Chrissy, in that preachy tone she can sometimes assume.

"Think I don't know that? If it were 1972, I wouldn't be practically bald, half my friends wouldn't be dead, and Alan wouldn't think he's about to drop a bomb out of a Flying Fortress onto Sunset Lodge. He thinks he's been kidnapped in an airplane. He makes *zoom-zoom* noises, it breaks my heart. It's not as if he

was even in the fucking Second World War!" She might be about to cry.

"Oh, Leonie, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean—" Now Chrissy might be about to cry.

Competitive crying: time to deflect, thinks Myrna. "The asphalt out there is literally melting," she says. "I almost dissolved. When I came through your door I looked like the wrath of God."

"That's why I thought we'd stay in here," says Chrissy, grasping Myrna's deflection like the relay-race baton it is. "With the A.C., not that I like it, but sometimes . . . I turned it up high, though it can make me sneeze. I hope it's not . . ."

Myrna gulps her Perrier, scoops up a handful of veggie puffs. "I get these things too, they're made of bean flour. The grand-kids love them. Leave some for your granny, I have to tell them. They're like squirrels!"

"My grandmother used to say that quite a lot," says Leonie, dabbing at her eyes with one of the rosebud napkins. She too is deflecting. Crying can so easily segue into backbiting and ruptures, thinks Myrna. The schismatic feminist feuds of the 1970s were ferocious and lasted for years, but at their age they no longer have the runway to do a proper, long-drawn-out feud.

"She used to say what?" she asks.

"Wrath of God," says Leonie. "Except she said it more like *roth*."

"And did she?" says Chrissy. She perches her slender bum carefully on the sofa, deploying her skirt with one hand, clutching her white wine spritzer with the other.

"Did she what?" said Myrna.

"Look like it. The wrath of God," says Chrissy.

"I don't know," says Leonie. "I never knew what 'wrath of God' meant."

"Maybe the landscape after God went over it with a whirlwind," says Myrna. "As was his habit. Broken. Flattened."

"Well, she looked pretty awful at the end," says Leonie. "Of her life. As we all will."

"Not that we don't now," says Chrissy.

"Don't now what?" says Myrna. Why is time slowing down on her? She's having trouble connecting the dots in this conversation, and she's not even drinking. Is this creeping aphasia? If so, how ironic. No, it's the other two jumping around like frogs on a griddle. "Oh, right," she says. "Look awful."

"Yes. It's the neck!" Chrissy takes a swig of her spritzer. "But what can you do? Should I bring out that new cheese and some crackers?"

"Can't hurt," says Leonie. Chrissy goes in search.

"Maybe we should get this show on the road," says Myrna. "What's the agenda?" At this rate they won't reach the main topic till midnight.

"You can have your neck lifted," says Leonie. "I did mine, oh, maybe ten years ago. But you'd never know it now, gravity's taking its toll."

"My mother did too," says Myrna. "Look like the wrath of God. Though once she was actually dead, you'd be amazed how smooth her face was. All those pain and worry lines, just gone. Sort of instant Botox." As soon as this is out of her mouth she feels herself blushing.

"That's morbid," says Leonie, grinning. "Too high a price! I'd rather be wrinkly."

"Anyway, I'm not letting them stick a knife into me," says Chrissy, returning with a primrose-yellow plate, the ashy cheese enthroned on lettuce leaves, surrounded by an oval of seed crackers. "And all those plastic surgeons are control freaks. They think they know what you should look like better than you do."

"A friend of mine got breast cancer," says Chrissy. "She had them both off, then she opted for the implants. She made drawings, she

took photos and measurements; she was an A cup, and she wanted to be back the way she was. The implant doctor went, Certainly, of course, don't you worry, and when she wakes up, she's a C! Practically a D! Couple of beach balls. She was so disappointed! Well, more like shocked and outraged."

"Cripes," says Leonie, laughing. "I bet he felt she ought to be grateful!" She's into the black olives; there's a dribble of juice on her patio pants.

White is such a mistake for pants, thinks Myrna.

"Something like that," says Chrissy, wielding a cracker. "Had a fine idea of himself. Tit man to the stars. Why did he think she needed big breasts? She's seventy-five!"

"Never say die," says Leonie. "Or not until you get there."

"Get where?" says Myrna. She eats a cheese-laden cracker. Suddenly she's hungry: it's the talk of death. "This cheese is fantastic," she says to Chrissy.

"Get to the die part." Leonie isn't laughing. She's finished her G and T and is mixing herself another.

"They did save her life," says Chrissy. "Those implants. She tripped and fell down, in the cellar. She would've hit her head on the cement floor, but the fake breasts were in between. She just bounced."

"That's a selling point," says Leonie. "They should put it in the ads."

"She got them taken out again though," said Chrissy. "The big implants."

"I would've too," says Myrna. "Did she have smaller ones put in?"

"No, she just sort of threw up her hands," says Chrissy.

"Like, Why bother?" says Myrna. "I get that." Like, Why *fucking* bother? she adds in her head.

There's a meditative pause.

"Okay, I guess it's time to rock 'n' roll," says Leonie. "The clock's ticking. I've got a hard stop before dinner. Lawyer. Will."

"Yeah, we should all do that," says Myrna. "Make our wills." She and Cal have discussed it, but they haven't taken the plunge. It's an easy thing to put off. *Will*, she muses. Such a slippery word. My will. Will of the gods. Will he, nil he. *Willy*, from *membrum virile*, Latin, the *virile* part: V was pronounced W, and the terminal *e* was voiced. Yet one more of the nine hundred and ninety-nine names for penis. "*Penis* is quite a young word," she says, "derived from a word meaning 'tail.' *Tail*, on the other hand, in reference to a woman as a sex object . . ." The others are staring at her. "Oops, inner monologue," she says. "Am I boring you?" She must take care not to free-associate in public places.

"Not me," says Leonie. "Who knew about the tails?"

"I'll get my notes," says Chrissy briskly. She's had enough of penises, in conversation as in life. She stands up and heads toward the kitchen, her draperies fluttering.

"Is it too hot to think about this?" says Myrna. "This whole project."

"No," says Leonie. "We're making progress."

Chrissy comes back with a pink folder, sits down again, opens the folder. "Good news, we're at half a million," she says. "A quarter of the way to our goal."

"That happened fast," says Myrna. "Last time we were only at a hundred and fifty. The initial bequest."

"Well, another old feminist came into money," says Chrissy. "Somebody died. She felt guilty about inheriting from a corrupt mining enterprise in Bolivia and decided to share with us."

"So, dirty money," says Leonie in an amused voice. Chrissy on the crux of a delicate moral dilemma has always amused her.

"All money is dirty," says Chrissy sanctimoniously, "but we'll put it to a clean use."

Leonie snorts a laugh, which Chrissy ignores. "It was Darlene who set this whole thing up for us," she says. "She put so much work into it! We can't let her down, we need to follow through. Maybe now we can hire an executive director."

"Good," says Myrna. "It's time we got someone who knows what she's doing. People with money should die more often."

"Stop talking about the D-word," Leonie says. She pulls herself up, out of the chaise longue. "I find it triggering."

This is possibly a joke. Yes, Myrna thinks, scanning Leonie's face, her impish grin: it is a joke.

"I find *triggering* triggering," says Myrna. Safe ground: they both laugh. "And you're being anti-corpse. Corpses are people too, you know."

"Sorry, sorry. We need to sober down," Leonie says. "By old feminist, do you mean former?" she asks Chrissy.

"No," says Chrissy. "Just old. Our generation."

"Things have changed," says Leonie. She's pouring herself another drink.

"Well, of course they have," says Chrissy. "Nothing's the same! You can't expect it! But the new ones have good intentions!"

"The road to Hell is paved with good intentions," Leonie intones.

"That's not fair," says Chrissy. "People really do mean well, mostly."

"It's partly fair, admit it," says Leonie. "They think their good intentions excuse all kinds of things. They're always accusing, they want heads on spikes. Plus, they're ultra critical."

Chrissy laughs. "That's exactly what my grandmother used to say when I complained! She'd say I didn't know how lucky I was that we had a refrigerator instead of an icebox. Then she'd start in

about the war. Rationing, and all that. The meat shortage. Not that I eat meat now anyway; or not as much."

"I only eat seafood," says Myrna. It's nice to have a check mark in a righteous lifestyle box where Chrissy doesn't have one. The truth is that meat now gives Myrna indigestion: her gut biome's no longer up to it.

Leonie eases herself back onto the chaise longue, tinkling the ice in her fresh drink. "I love gin," she says.

"Let's concentrate," says Chrissy. "We write the proposal, setting out the terms exactly—Darlene says that's the next step. Then once we've placed the project at a university, we make an announcement. I thought a virtual press conference, on Zoom."

"Okay, let's go," says Leonie. "What are we proposing, exactly? Pass the goat cheese, it's five-star."

"We can say it's an endowed chair for an emerging female," says Chrissy.

"Which is a contradiction," says Myrna. "An endowed chair should be for a person who's already established."

"You need to add trans," says Leonie.

"Darlene says there should be a chair that appeals to young women," says Chrissy. "They're more than half of the total number of students at universities now, but Darlene says it's still more men at the top. Also, we have to pin down the right university. Darlene's is out, she's tested the waters there."

"Try my old place," says Myrna. "If there's enough money attached, they'd house the devil's grandmother."

"Young women won't like this chair thing, they'll say it's elitist," says Leonie.

"Oh, surely . . ." says Chrissy.

"They don't actually like much of anything," Leonie continues. "Remember what hell it was being young?"

"It was nice at times," said Chrissy. "Though I don't miss PMS."

"Darlene told me that the hormones women have in them when they've got PMS, men have in them all the time," says Myrna.

"That would account for world leaders," says Leonie.

"If Darlene were here, we'd have been done an hour ago," says Chrissy.

"Okay, emerging creative, blah-blah!" says Leonie. "God, I hate *emerging*. Emerging from what? Makes them sound as if they're coming out of a swamp."

"Maybe the metaphor is chicks hatching," says Myrna. "Out of eggs."

"Everyone knows what *emerging* means," says Chrissy. "Please focus. Should it be woman or female?"

"Don't even go there," says Leonie. "I'm getting a headache. Tell me again why we're putting in the time on this."

"We're correcting the gender balance," says Chrissy reproachfully. "Because a lot more male creatives still get the big jobs and win the awards and things. Remember that chart Darlene put together?"

"It's okay, I'm teasing," says Leonie. "I get it. We're laying the foundations for the brave new generation of emerging non-cis-male creatives, and by the way, I hate *creatives* too. They're not a separate class of people. Everyone's creative!"

"We're doing it because we made a commitment," says Myrna. "To Darlene. Anyway, it's not so much for the future, we won't be here by then. It's for the past."

"Sort of like a memorial?" asks Leonie. "I like it. A memorial to the old harridans like us."

"We can't put that in the proposal," says Chrissy. "Certainly not harridans."

"Joking," says Leonie, staring into her glass.

"We have to put in that it's for younger creatives," says Chrissy.

"The ones who want Darlene's head in a basket?" says Leonie. "My head too, I bet, if they ever found out what was inside it."

"So, who's volunteering to write the proposal?" says Chrissy.

"I vote you," says Leonie.

"I'm not good at it. It should be Myrna," says Chrissy. "She's the language expert."

"Myrna? How about it?" says Leonie.

"I'd be too picky," says Myrna. "Obsessive about words. It would take me months. Why don't we hire the executive whatnot and she can do it?"

"Darlene is so excellent at these things," says Chrissy sadly.

"Couldn't we talk her into coming back?" asks Myrna.

"I don't think so," says Chrissy. "She says she feels . . . scorched."

"As in burned," says Leonie. "Some hotshot ladder-climber wants her job, is my guess. Can't they wait decently until she retires, or croaks of natural causes?"

"That's kind of cynical," says Chrissy. "A lot of them really believe—"

"Enlighten me," says Leonie. "'Really believe' seldom comes into it. We're in the middle of a regime change, like the French Revvie. Power struggles! They were always changing the passwords. Wake up one morning, use yesterday's password, off with your head."

"We didn't wait decently ourselves," says Myrna. "As I recall. We defenestrated a few old fogies, one way or another. In retrospect, we may have been cruel."

"But those were men!" Leonie exclaims.

"Sleeping with the enemy? Remember that?" says Myrna.

"Yeah, it was fun," says Leonie. "I slept with a lot of enemies. I told myself I was a spy."

"Hypocrite," says Myrna. They laugh.

"Promise me something," says Leonie. "Closed coffin, jokes at my funeral, and lots of gin at the wake."

"Double promise," says Myrna.

"Please don't do that," says Chrissy. "It makes me too sad."

There's a pause.

"Back to Darlene," says Leonie. "She must be feeling battered. We need to give her some ego strokes." She takes out her cellphone. "Darlene? Leonie here. Fine. More or less fine. I've been better." A pause. "Sorry about the slime mould uproar, or whatever that was. We live in dangerous times. The Committee of Public Safety is out to get us." A pause. "Figure of speech."

"Tell her she's essential," Chrissy whispers. "Say we can't do it without her."

"Tell her there's an astonishing cheese," says Myrna. "A new one. She loves those."

"Listen, we're at Chrissy's," Leonie continues. "We need you to come over. Need, need, need." There's a pause. "Yes, it's about the chair for emerging whatever, for female and et cetera creatives, for young..." Another pause. "No, you don't have to be an official committee member, you just have to help us. We're obsolete and uncool, but you can sneak in the back door so no one will see you with us." A pause. "We can't write the proposal by ourselves. We've tried. We get sidetracked. Words fail us." A pause. "It's my dying wish. Anyway, we're drunk."

"Speak for yourself," says Myrna.

"I hope she comes," says Chrissy, clasping her hands.

"In addition to which," says Leonie, "there's a new cheese, ashed goat, unbelievable, and you really have to see Myrna's hair. She screwed up her courage and went to her hair guy, and it came out bright maroon! Limited viewing time only, she's going to change it back, you need to come over or you'll miss it. She got a tattoo as well." A pause. "You're a complete star! Medal in Heaven! We're

waiting right here! We're saving you some cheese!" She hangs up. "She's coming!"

"Oh, thank goodness!" says Chrissy.

"Liar," says Myrna. "I didn't get a tattoo."

"Darlene could never resist weird hair," says Leonie. "She's written about it: weird hair as a courtship signal. Though among golden lion tamarins."

"Who would I be courtship-signalling to?" says Myrna, laughing. "The men I know can barely get out of bed!"

"They don't need to get out of bed, you just need to get into it," says Leonie. "With your magenta hair. Shazam! Instant boner, way better than Viagra."

"Now stop teasing Myrna, she didn't intend that colour," says Chrissy.

"I'll defend against hair aggression with an ancient curse," says Myrna. "May the devil fuck you!"

"Wish somebody would. But do your worst," says Leonie. "I'm a tough old hag, I'll simply rise above it. I'm having another G and T. Just a weak one."

"My grandmother always used to say that! Rise above it!" says Chrissy.

"Like sewer gas," says Myrna.

"Like a kite!" says Chrissy. "Like a balloon! Like flying!"

Like the soul leaving the body in the form of a butterfly, thinks Myrna. Like breath.

"Here's to rising above it," says Leonie. "Whatever that means." She lifts her glass. "All together now! Up we go!"